

MANTO'S PRAYER

Dear God, master of the universe, compassionate and merciful: we who are steeped in sin kneel in supplication before your throne and beseech you to recall from this world Saadat Hasan Manto, son of Ghulam Hasan Manto, who was a man of great piety.

Take him away, Lord, for he runs away from fragrance and chases after filth. He hates the bright sun, preferring dark labyrinths. He has nothing but contempt for modesty but is fascinated by the naked and the shameless. He hates sweetness, but will give his life to taste bitter fruit. He will not so much as look at housewives but is in seventh heaven in the company of whores, He will not go near running waters, but loves to wade through dirt. Where others weep, he laughs; and where others laugh, he weeps. Faces blackened by evil, he loves to wash with tender care to make visible their real features.

He never thinks about you but follows Satan everywhere, the same fallen angel who once disobeyed you.

INTRODUCTION

This collection brings together in English translation Saadat Hasan Manto's best works. It includes stories from several of my collections published since 1987 in London, New York, New Delhi and Lahore, and twenty or so stories that I had left out for one reason or another and which have now been translated for this volume. No other Urdu writer's work has been so extensively translated into English as that of Manto, though the quality of some translations has tended to be less than satisfactory. A collection of his stories has been published in a Japanese translation; and here and there in anthologies, the odd Manto story, almost always his classic 1947 tale 'Toba Tek Singh', continues to appear. Manto has also been translated into many languages spoken in the subcontinent.

I have also translated for this collection the only stage play—'In This Vortex'—that, to my knowledge, Manto ever wrote. It is a powerful work and it is the first time it has been translated into English. I have also translated a short and amusing piece Manto wrote, not long before his death, on himself, as well as a moving letter he once wrote to his readers. He also put into that document his views on ideologically motivated literature, accusing members of the Progressive Writers' Association of trying to turn a machine into a poem and a poem into a machine. This volume also carries Manto's nine letters to Uncle Sam, which reflect Manto's sharp understanding of power politics. Translations of two conversations about Manto, one among his daughters, his sister (who has since passed on) and his wife's sister, and one among his friends are included in the appendix.

I have revised several of my earlier translations, some in order to deal with the charge made by one Indian critic that I had 'summarized' certain passages in certain stories, instead of translating them literally, word for word. I hope no fault will be found on that count—for now at least—with what this book contains. However, a translation is a translation.

In presenting Manto, I have tried to retain the bite and sharpness, no less than the infrequent but moving lyricism of his style. Manto was one of the great writers of Urdu prose and I have attempted to retain the essence of his style—or perhaps I should call it

the sound of his voice—in translation. However, like all translators, I am painfully aware of the fact that translations are approximations of the original, at best. My only aim, if not my ambition, was and has been to bring Manto's work to the attention of as large an audience beyond the subcontinent as possible. This he deserves, more than any other writer of his generation. Perhaps I have had some success in that direction, though of a limited nature, because of the reluctance of western publishers to print translations from the subcontinent's writers, especially short fiction. This has meant that Manto's name and reputation outside India and Pakistan remain confined to a small though select readership, mostly in universities.

Born in Sambrala, now in the Indian state of Punjab, on 11 May 1912, Saadat Hasan Manto died in Lahore, Pakistan, on 18 January 1955. He was not even forty-three. In a literary and journalistic career spanning more than twenty years, he wrote over 250 stories and a large number of plays and essays, but it is on his stories that his reputation rests.

Coming from a middle-class Kashmiri family of Amritsar, Manto showed little enthusiasm for formal education. He failed his school-leaving examination twice in a row; ironically, one of the subjects he was unable to pass was Urdu, in which he was to produce such a powerful and original body of work in the years to come. He was also to bloom into one of the language's great stylists.

Manto entered college in Amritsar in 1931, failed his first-year examination twice, and dropped out. Those were turbulent years in the history of India. The horrific Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar had taken place in 1919, when Manto was a boy of seven; one of his most poignant stories, 'It Happened in 1919', is based on that event. Punjab, and Amritsar in particular, was in constant turmoil throughout the 1920s. Political life was characterized by civil disobedience, often turning into open and militant defiance of British authority. Manto, restless and rebellious by nature, found the situation and atmosphere intensely exciting. It was during these impressionable years that he fell under the influence of a man who was to push him towards literature and politics. That man, Bari Aliq, now mainly remembered as the author of a history of the East India Company, was then a footloose writer, journalist and armchair revolutionary, devoted to 'revolution' but mortally afraid of the police. He was a man who had read extensively and was the first to sense Manto's talent, and help transform his vague fascination with revolution into strong literary commitment. Bari introduced him to Russian and French literature, ultimately persuading him to undertake an Urdu translation of Victor Hugo's *The Last Days of a Condemned Man*, a task the young Manto completed in two weeks. The book was accepted by a small publishing house in the neighbouring city of Lahore and printed.

Thrilled by his first success, Manto undertook a translation of Oscar Wilde's *Vera*, published in 1934. He was greatly inspired by the florid style of the original. As he later wrote, he and his friends, walking the streets of Amritsar, would pretend that they were in Moscow launching a revolution. Manto was also much taken with the firebrand Punjabi revolutionary and Indian nationalist Bhagat Singh, who was hanged in Lahore in 1931 for the murder of a British police officer. Those were heady times. There was a smell of revolt and revolution in the air and, for the first time, it appeared possible to force the British to quit India. Bari now began to urge his protégé to write original stories in Urdu. Manto wrote at amazing speed and never took a second look at what he had written. For

example, one of his longest stories, 'Mummy' (included in this collection), was written in one or two marathon sittings. Among the first of Manto's Urdu stories, 'Tamasha', published in a small literary magazine from Lahore, was built around the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. He was to return to the subject in his later years in a powerfully evocative tale ('It Happened in 1919').

In 1934, under the influence of a school friend from Amritsar, Manto decided to enter the famous Aligarh Muslim University. Predictably, he did not do well as a student, but he used the time to write and publish more original stories for magazines. Unfortunately, his stay at the university lasted only nine months. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis—falsely as it turned out—and sent to recover at the small hill town of Batot in Kashmir (he wrote a number of stories of his time there and may have had a brief romantic fling while recuperating). He returned to Amritsar, and then moved to Lahore to take up his first regular job with a magazine called *Paras*.

But he soon tired of what he described as 'yellow journalism' and in 1936 arrived in Bombay to edit a film weekly, *Mussawar*. By this time, Bari had moved to Rangoon in search of employment. The two were never to be close associates again, though Manto, who was generally too vain to acknowledge a debt, always considered Bari the most important literary and political influence of his life. He wrote once that had he not met Bari in Amritsar he might have become a criminal instead of a writer.

Manto loved Bombay, which was not only India's film capital, but also its most vibrant and stylish city. His love affair with Bombay was to last throughout his life, though he left the city twice, once only briefly in 1941 but for good the second time, after Partition in 1947. In his powerful memoir about his friend, the actor Shyam ('Krishna's Flute', included here), he summed up his feelings about Bombay and the trauma of Partition and his departure for Pakistan. 'I found it impossible to decide which of the two countries was now my homeland—India or Pakistan?' In the summer of 1952, in an appendix to one of his finest collections of stories, *Yazid*, he recalled his days in Bombay and wrote about the city he considered to be the best thing that ever happened to him.

In a poignant piece, in the form of a letter to his readers, he wrote:

My heart is steeped in sorrow today. A strange melancholy has descended on me. Four and a half years ago, when I said goodbye to my second home, Bombay, I had felt the same way. I was sad at leaving a place where I had spent so many days of a hard-working life. That piece of land had offered shelter to a family reject and it had said to me, 'You can be happy here on two pennies a day or on ten thousand rupees a day, if you wish. You can also spend your life here as the unhappiest man in the world. You can do what you want. No one will find fault with you. Nor will anyone subject you to moralizing. You alone will have to accomplish the most difficult of tasks and you alone will have to make every important decision of your life. You may live on the footpath or in a magnificent palace; it will not matter in the least to me. You may leave or you may stay, it will make no difference to me. I am where I am and that is where I will remain.'

... I am a Bombay on the move. Wherever I happen to be, that is where I will make a world of my own.

Manto would have felt sad, were he alive today, to know that Bombay has been renamed Mumbai by an intolerant, revivalist party of religious zealots, the kind of people

he hated passionately all his life. The ultimate reason for his leaving Bombay was the hate mail that was being sent to Filmistan, the studio where he worked with such close friends as Ashok Kumar, accusing Manto of infiltrating the studio with Muslims. It was shattering for a humanist like Manto, and for a man who was above the religious divide that had set India on fire, to be branded a Muslim communalist. He stopped going to the studio and would stay in his flat all day long in a somnambulist state- And then one day, he packed his bags and left for Karachi by ship.

His last years in Lahore were years of intense creativity, extreme poverty and ill health caused by heavy drinking; he felt inconsolably nostalgic for Bombay and regretted ever having left it.

But to return to his time in Bombay, he was engaged as a staff writer by Imperial Film Company from where he moved to Film City after one of the films he had written crashed at the box office. At the urging of friends, he returned to Imperial some time later. He was both fascinated and disgusted by the world of movies. As he wrote to a friend in Lahore, 'The people who have the most influence in film companies are those whose ideas are old and useless, who are completely ignorant.' At one point, he was not only writing for films, but also editing two magazines. In between, he was contributing to All India Radio. His first collection of stories was published in 1940, followed by a volume of essays in 1942, a year after he left Bombay for the first time to move to Delhi to join All India Radio as a staff writer. He was going through a period of depression because of the death of his son and his mother, to whom he was deeply attached in contrast to his relationship with his father, a harsh and stern disciplinarian who scoffed at the writing of his youngest son, whom he wanted to become a lawyer like his half-brothers, who were settled in East Africa and Fiji.

Manto lived in Delhi less than two years before returning to Bombay, the city he felt was his real home. He took his old job at *Mussawar* and began to freelance for the movies. In 1943, he joined Filmistan, a company set up by a group of his friends from the famous Bombay Talkies. Manto wrote a number of successful films for Filmistan, including *Eight Days*, the story of a shell-shocked soldier in the Second World War.

On the eve of Independence, communal tension in Bombay, as elsewhere, was high. Then came Partition and the emergence of the free dominions of India and Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands of refugees had begun to move from one country to the other and some of history's worst carnages and bloodletting was in progress in Punjab and several other areas. Manto's wife and children and some other members of his family had already migrated to Pakistan. He was in two minds as to what he should do. His wife and others were sending him messages to get out of Bombay and come to Lahore. A new era had begun, but no one was sure what lay ahead. What decided the issue for Manto was a string of threats to the Bombay Talkies management that unless it sacked all its Muslim employees its studio would be burnt down.

Manto himself has not written about it but his wife, Safia, wrote to one of Manto's Indian biographers, Brij Premi, on 6 April 1968:

He was always treated unjustly by everyone. The truth is that he had no intention of leaving India, but a few months before Partition, Filmistan handed him a notice of termination and that, believe me, broke his heart. For a long time, he kept it hidden from me because he was proud of his friendship with Mr. Mukerjee and Ashok Kumar. So how

could he tell me that he had been served with a notice? That was when he started drinking heavily, which in the end claimed his life. I had come over earlier; he came in January 1948. While he was alone in Bombay, his drinking got completely out of hand. Here his life was full of worries. You can yourself imagine the state he was in and if it was conducive in any sense. His health had also become poor. But one thing he did. He wrote prodigiously, almost a story a day, until the day he died. That is all I know.

Whether Manto was sacked or whether he left on his own, one day in January 1948, he packed his bags and took a ship to Karachi, the first capital of the new Muslim homeland of Pakistan.

Manto wrote about his last days in Bombay in his moving tribute to his friend, the debonair actor Shyam who died in a tragic accident during the shooting of a movie a couple of years before Manto's own death.

It seems such a long time ago. The Muslims and Hindus were engaged in a bloody fratricidal war. Thousands died every day from both sides. One day, Shyam and I went to visit a Sikh family from Rawalpindi—Shyam's hometown—and sat there listening in shocked silence to their horrifying account of the killing and rioting they had witnessed and survived. I could see that Shyam was deeply moved. I could well understand what was passing through his mind. When we left, I said to him, 'I am a Muslim, don't you want to kill me?' 'Not now,' he replied gravely, 'but while I was listening to them and they were telling me about the atrocities committed by the Muslims, I could have killed you.' His answer shocked me deeply. Perhaps I could have killed him too when he spoke those words. When I thought about it later, I suddenly understood the psychological background of India's religiously motivated bloodbath. Shyam had said he could have killed me 'then' but not 'now'. Therein lay the key to the holocaust of Partition.

In Bombay Talkies religious tension was rising every day. Since Ashok Kumar and Savak Vacha had taken over Bombay Talkies, most senior positions had gone to Muslims, but it was pure coincidence. This had caused much resentment among the Hindu staff. Vacha had begun to receive a steady stream of hate mail containing threats of arson and murder. Not that he or Ashok gave a damn about this sort of thing; however, being sensitive by temperament, I could not help but feel deeply disturbed by the atmosphere. A number of times, I expressed this unease to Ashok and Vacha and even suggested that they should sack me because some Hindu employees believed that the Muslim influx in Bombay Talkies was entirely due to me. Both said I had taken leave of my senses.

Indeed I had. My wife and children were in Pakistan, but they had gone there when it was still the India that I knew. I was familiar with the occasional riot which broke out between Hindus and Muslims, but now that piece of land that I had once known as India had a new name. Would that change everything? I did not know. What self-government was going to be like, I had no idea, though I thought long and hard about it.

In *Siyah Hasbye*, Manto's collection of vignettes and sketches about the 1947 killings (included in entirety in this volume!), none of the bloody participants is identified by religion because to Manto what mattered was not what religion people professed, what rituals they followed or which gods they worshipped, but where they stood on a human level. If a man killed, it did not matter whether he killed in the name of his gods or for the glory of his country or his way of life. To Manto, he was a killer. In his book, nothing

could justify inhumanity, cruelty or the taking of life. In the holocaust of 1947, he found no heroes, except those whose humanity occasionally and at the most unexpected moments caught up with them as they pillaged, raped and killed those who had done them no personal harm and whom they did not even know. Manto saw the vast tragedy of 1947 with detachment, but not with indifference because he cared deeply.

The sketches, some of them no longer than a line or two, bring out the enormity of the tragedy set in motion by the great divide. They are deeply ironic and often profoundly moving. A Kashmiri labourer finds himself in the middle of a street riot and as the crowd breaks into stores and begins to loot the goods, he too picks up a sack of rice; but is pursued by the police and shot in the leg. He falls to the ground and is made to carry the bag he has stolen to the police station. After he fails to persuade them to let him keep it, he stutters, 'Exalted sirs, you keep the rice, all poor me ask is my wages for carrying the bag, just four annas.'

In another sketch, a husband and wife save themselves by hiding in the basement of their home, but emerge two days later to get some food and are caught by the new occupants who happen to be members of a faith that forbids the killing of any living thing. They refuse to let the couple leave and instead send for 'help' from a neighbouring village whose inhabitants have no compunction about taking life. The fugitives perish but the religious obligations of the pacifists stand duly fulfilled.

The greatest of Manto's Partition stories is Toba Tek Singly, now an acknowledged masterpiece. The madness that has gripped the subcontinent at the time of Independence has permeated even the lunatic asylums and the great decision-makers in the two countries decide that since there has been a transfer of populations and assets, it is only logical that non-Muslim lunatics should be repatriated to India and Muslim lunatics in India to Pakistan. On the day of the great exchange, there is only one man, Bishan Singh, who refuses to leave because he wants to stay where he was born and where his family lived, in the town of Toba Tek Singh in Pakistani Punjab. The exchange takes place at the line that divides the two new states which, until a few days ago, were one state. The guards try to push Bishan Singh into India but he refuses to move because he says he wants to live neither in India nor in Pakistan, but in Toba Tek Singh. They leave him alone because he is known as a harmless old man who talks gibberish that nobody can understand. As the morning breaks, Bishan Singh screams just once, falls and dies. This is how Manto ends this classic parable: 'There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name lay Toba Tek Singh.'

'Colder Than ice', another masterpiece that earned Manto an obscenity charge and a trial, is the story of Isher Singh, a Sikh who abducts a Muslim girl during the riots and rapes her, only to realize later that she has been dead all along. Another story, 'The Assignment', is set in Amritsar in 1947. A dying Muslim judge who is alone with his teenage daughter, is visited by the son of an old Sikh whom he had once done a favour, in acknowledgement of which he sends him a gift of food every year on the occasion of the festival of Id. The old Sikh has died but has instructed his son from his deathbed never to discontinue the giving of the annual gift. The son comes to Amritsar from his village, finds the city in flames, with bands of crazed killers roaming the streets. Some of them

are about to attack the Muslim judge's house, but delay their assault at the young Sikh's urging. What happens next chillingly illustrates the savage irony of those times.

'The Dog of Titwal' and 'The Last Salute' relate to the war in Kashmir in the wake of independence. In the first story, bored soldiers whose one link with normalcy is a dog that keeps shuttling between the two positions decide one day to have some fun by firing at the animal while he tries to seek the safety that the players are unwilling to give him. Their sport ends in tragedy. In the second story, two men fighting on opposing sides in Kashmir, discover that they had fought together during the Second World War and were the best of friends. They shout across the dividing line to each other, recall old times, crack jokes and call each other by their regimental nicknames. But their reunion ends tragically, underscoring the ironic dilemma of yesterday's comrades having become today's enemies because of a line drawn across a map.

After arriving in Lahore in 1948, Manto wrote just one film but it flopped badly. After that he did not get any work. Actually, there was very little work around as the Pakistan movie industry had started from scratch and, there being no ban on the import of movies from India at the time, the meagre output from Lahore with its ageing production facilities offered little competition to the fare from across the border. There was hardly any money to be made from writing. Most writers subsisted on what they could make out of Radio Pakistan. Ironically, every frontline writer was on the government's banned list, Manto being one of them. The list's existence was never officially acknowledged but it was common knowledge that it not only existed, but was scrupulously adhered to. Even today, sixty years into independence, the government-run media maintains a distinction between those who will be invited to contribute and those who will be ignored. Manto would have been amused but not surprised.

What money Manto made in Lahore was either through token royalties, meagre advances from publishers or through newspaper and magazine writings. He was a prodigious writer and he wrote at amazing speed. Many times, he would walk into the office of a newspaper or magazine, demand money and, on being told that it could only be given in exchange for a contribution, seat himself in a corner and produce a piece in less than an hour. Some of these pieces were pure potboilers, but amazingly most have survived the test of time. Starved of cash, he began to write his reminiscences of the Bombay cinema and its personalities for two Lahore publications: the newspaper *Afaq* and the monthly movie journal *Director* edited by Chaudhri Fazle Haq.

In the early years of independence, there were not too many taxis in Lahore, the tonga still being the most commonly used mode of transport. Manto liked to ride in smartly turned-out tongas and would commandeer one and keep it all day as he made the rounds of publishers' offices and the last port of call, the liquor store. Many of the tongawalas of Lahore knew Manto well enough to sometimes provide him service on credit. When he had money, he was generous with it.

Lack of work and ill health notwithstanding, it was in Lahore in the last seven years of his life that Manto produced some of the greatest short stories written in any language. He pined for Bombay and wrote to his friend, the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai a number of times that she should get him to India, and preferably Bombay, after speaking to Mukerjee at Bombay Talkies. That was not to be. Certain things in life are irreversible; this was one such. Manto felt neglected by officialdom (he remains neglected till today as

no posthumous honour has been conferred on him, no road or institution named after him, no acknowledgement of his ever having lived or written made, barring a one-time issue postage stamp).

In a postscript to one of his collections he wrote, addressing his readers:

You know me as a story writer and the courts of this country know me as a pornographer. The government sometimes calls me a communist, at other times a great writer. Most of the time, I am denied all means of making a living, only to be offered opportunities of gainful work on other occasions. I have been called an unnecessary appendage to society and expelled accordingly. And sometimes I have been told that I am on the list of those the state considers desirable. As in the past, so today, I have tried to understand what I am. I want to know what my place in this country that is called the largest Islamic state in the world is. What use am I here?

You may call it my imagination, but for me it is the bitter truth that so far I have failed to find a place for myself in this country called Pakistan, which I love greatly. That is why I am always restless. That is why sometimes I am to be found in a lunatic asylum and sometimes in a hospital. I have yet to find a niche for myself in Pakistan, though as far as I am concerned, I think of myself as an important person. I believe that I have a name and a place in Urdu literature because, frankly, if I did not have that delusion, life would become quite unbearable.

In all, six of his stories were considered 'obscene' by the state, three of them before Independence ('The Gift', 'A Wet Afternoon' and 'Odour') and two in Pakistan ('Colder Than Ice' and 'The Return'). The Punjab government declared 'Colder Than Ice' obscene and harmful for public morality. Manto was tried and convicted, but the judgement of the lower court was set aside in appeal, only to be reconfirmed by a Lahore High Court judge. Manto recalled that episode and his state of mind in a note appended to his book *Ganjay Frishtay*:

I felt utterly lost. I wasn't sure what I should do. Should I stop writing altogether or should I write recklessly, unconcerned with consequences? I felt utterly listless. Sometimes I wished they would give me a lucrative piece of property so I could be free for a few years not only of financial worth but this entire business of reading and writing. I dreamt of becoming a different person who would no-longer think, preferring to make a living selling contraband stuff for profit or producing illicit liquor. The last possibility I eventually crossed out from my list of alternative lifestyles because I was afraid I would drink half my produce myself. Contraband stuff I could not trade in because that needed capital and I had none.

While everyone with the slightest influence was engaged in grabbing properties abandoned by the non-Muslims who had moved to India, Manto really got nothing because the authorities saw him as a dangerous and undesirable 'progressive' and possibly a crypto-communist plotting to overthrow established authority. Ironically, the Progressive Writers' Movement had some time earlier declared that Saadat Hasan Manto was a 'reactionary'. In the end, Manto decided to write so that he could pull himself out of the depression in which he had fallen. He began by writing about the Bombay film world that he had known and the stars with whom he had worked and formed such close friendships. His first piece, 'Naseem: The Fairy Queen', was published in the Lahore newspaper *Afaq*. This is how he recalled that time:

I was happy that I had found a way out and would be safe from the government's displeasure and those who declare that all writing should be 'clean'. But I was wrong. The moment my first piece appeared, there was an uproar. The newspaper received piles of mail denouncing the author . . . And when my piece on Shyam ['Krishna's Flute']¹ was published, a certain lady, Nayyar Bano from Sialkot, wrote a long letter to the editor that made me feel very sorry for her. Here are some excerpts from her letter: 'Now please read "Krishna's Flute" yourself once again and decide what it is. Can a person, no matter how far removed from the virtuous life and how low of character, ever wish to sit at home, surrounded by his wife and children, and narrate the experiences you have written about? It doesn't matter how much drinking he has done, or how fond he is of being in his cups. He may even talk nothing but filth or treat women as mere condiments that are to be used to spice his daily meal. Can he ever call a woman something other than a "sali" or set his bed on fire when he finds it without a woman inside.

"Please tell me in what way are you serving humanity or public morals when you splash this sort of thing across the pages of newspapers? There are others out there who have homes and families and children whom you should think of as you think of your own home, family and children. Or does this world belong only to men who are free to do what their fancy dictates, who are free to spread dirt and soil themselves and others with that dirt, even infect the innocent? Are these men not accountable to anyone? Where should people like us find refuge? How should we shelter ourselves? Perhaps the only thing parents can do, considering the evil being spread by newspapers, magazines and literature is to join the perpetrators. Fathers should teach their sons how to drown themselves in drink and how these "sali" women should be dragged into the pit of infamy. Mothers should instruct their daughters in the latest methods of seduction. God forbid, just think of the kind of world it would be. Just think about it. I smoulder when I think about it.'

When I read this letter, by God I felt greatly affected. I experienced great pity for Nayyar Bano's condition and it occurred to me that I may have done this lady a great injustice and I must do something to make it up to her. But then I thought that if, to the best of my ability and understanding, I tried to make it up to a woman who feels herself lowered in her own eyes when she looks at pictures printed in a magazine and feels as if she had invaded someone's privacy, she may not be able to bear the shock. She may even fall unconscious. She may even die of shock. I am in no doubt that Nayyar Bano is among those mentally sick people who deserve our pity. Their only treatment, as far as I can diagnose, is that entire pools should be filled with liquor with corks flying out of bottles in every direction, while they are forced to watch the Bacchanal proceedings. The worst filth in the world should be kicked up for their benefit. One should throw dust on one's head and if one is unable to perform these acts oneself, one should hire people who should shout every obscenity there exists in their ears. The advertisements that appear in rags such as *Shama*, *Bisiveen Sadi* and *Roman* [a reference to advertisements for aphrodisiacs and 'secret' sexual ailments] should be repeatedly hurled at them loudly. And if this recipe fails to cure them, then Saadat Hasan Manto should be made to pick up Nayyar Bano's old sandal and hit himself in the head till he is completely bald.

Another correspondent claimed that Manto had shown disrespect to the dead by exposing their sexual peccadilloes and exposing their moral frailties instead of drawing a veil over their failings and saying something nice about them. The morally outraged

correspondent also complained that Manto's writings were so depraved that no 'lady of the house'¹ or young girls and children should be exposed to them. Manto dealt with this gentleman characteristically, in the process outlining his literary credo. He wrote:

If I have committed a sin, then I have committed it in the full knowledge that it was a sin. The correspondent assures me that in every civilized society and every civilized country; only good words are used to remember those who have passed on, even if they were enemies in life. Only their virtues are highlighted; their failings are overlooked and ignored. If that indeed is what happens, then I pronounce a thousand curses on that civilized society and that civilized country where every dead person's character and personality are carted off to a laundry so that they can come back scrubbed clean and white, ready to be hanged under a sign saying 'Of Blessed Memory'. In my reform house, I keep no combs, curlers or shampoos because I do not know how to apply make-up to human beings. If Agha Hashr [celebrated playwright known as 'the Indian Shakespeare'] was cross-eyed, I have no device that can straighten his crooked eye, nor can I make him shed flowers from his mouth in place of the four-letter words that were his forte. I am also unable to purify the deviant character of Meeraji [Urdu poet who had some strange and peculiar personal characteristics!], as I have been unable to make my friend Shyam not describe self-important women as 'salis'. Every angel admitted to the facility I operate has been barbered thoroughly and in style so that not a single hair may be left standing on his head.

Manto wrote his own epitaph, though ironically, it does not appear on his grave because his family was afraid that, if it did, there were enough mad mullahs in the country, one or more of whom would immediately declare the act heretical and the author 'outside the pale of Islam'. Instead, the family chose a couplet from Manto's favourite nineteenth-century poet, Ghalib, to whom one of his books is dedicated; and about whom he had once said that after Ghalib the right to compose poetry stood forfeited. The couplet from Ghalib reads: 'Dear God, why does time erase my name off from the tablet of the living? I am, after all, not one of those words that is mistakenly calligraphed twice and, on detection, removed.'

Here in Manto's own hand are the words that he wanted to mark his grave with:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto and with him lie buried all the secrets and mysteries of the art of short-story writing . . . Under tons of earth he lies, still wondering who among the two is the greater short-story writer: God or he.

Saadat Hasan Manto 18 August 1954

And while Manto lies there wondering, there can be no two opinions about his greatness. His stories have stood the test of time, the only test that establishes greatness or the lack of it.

A WET AFTERNOON

On his way to school, Masood walked past a butcher carrying a huge basket on his head that contained two recently slaughtered sheep. Their skins had been removed and from the bare flesh rose a misty vapour. The carcasses were so fresh that they were still throbbing. He saw it and his body trembled, bringing a glow to his cold cheeks and reminding him of the way one of his eyelids sometimes throbbed.

It was a quarter past nine but, because of a dull, low cloud, it felt like the early hours of the morning. There was no bite in the cold but he could see the breath coming out of people's mouths as they went their way. It WAS like puffs of steam pouring forth from the nozzle of a samovar. There was a heaviness in the air, as if it was weighted down by the overhanging clouds. This weather gave him the same feeling that walking in rubber shoes did. And while there were many people up and about in the bazaar, and the shops were beginning to show signs of life, the level of noise was low, like a whispered conversation. People were moving slowly as if they were afraid of having their footsteps heard.

Masood moved lazily; his satchel was under his arm. When he had seen the vapour rising from the freshly slaughtered sheep, he had experienced a strange pleasure, experienced a certain warmth rise in his body. It felt good and he wished he could experience the same comforting sensation when, on cold days, he was caned on his outstretched hands by the teacher.

The light of the day was not clear but diffuse. Everything seemed to be coated with a thin layer of mist, making the atmosphere heavy, but it did not strain the eyes because the contours of everything were indistinct.

When Masood arrived at the school, his classmates told him there would be no classes because of the death of the school secretary. They looked happy; in fact, they had already begun to play in the school yard, having flung their satchels to the ground. Some had gone home, while others were gathered at the school notice board, reading the school closure announcement over and over again.

The news brought Masood no joy. He felt no emotion at all. He was not the least bit sorry that the school secretary had died. He thought of the time the year before when his grandfather had died and there had been much difficulty with the burial because of rain. He had accompanied the body to the graveyard and almost slipped into the open pit because the ground was so muddy. He remembered it distinctly. It was very cold and there were red blotches of mud all over his white clothes. His hands were blue with cold and, when he pressed them for warmth, whitish spots appeared under the skin. His nose felt like an icicle. He remembered coming home, washing his hands and changing into fresh clothes. The school secretary's death had brought all that back. He was sure when they carried him for burial, it would begin to rain and the graveyard would get muddy. Many people would slip and suffer painful injury. He made straight for the classroom, unlocked his desk, took out the books he was going to bring in the next day and left them in. Then he picked up his satchel and began to walk home.

On the way, he again came upon those two freshly slaughtered sheep. One of them was now hanging by a hook in the butcher's shop and the other was lying across a large

cutting board. Masood had an urge to touch the flesh from which he had seen vapour rising. He stopped and touched the still throbbing part with his cold finger. It felt good. The butcher was busy sharpening his knives, which encouraged him to touch the flesh again before walking off.

When he told his mother about the school secretary's death, she said that his father had gone for the funeral. That left only two people in the house, his mother, who was cooking in the kitchen, and his sister Kalsoom who, her hands placed for warmth over a small fire, was trying to memorize the musical scale of the raag Darbari.

Since his friends from the neighbourhood all went to Government School, the death of the secretary of Islamia School had earned them no holiday. That meant there was no one to play with, nor any homework to do. In any case, whatever there was to be learnt in the sixth form, his father had already taught him at home. He had no particular game to play with either, except a dirty pack of cards lying in the alcove. Masood was not interested. The board games that his sister played with her friends were beyond his comprehension. Since he was simply not interested in them, he had never even tried to learn the rules.

He placed his satchel in its customary niche, took off his jacket and went to the kitchen to sit next to his mother. He could hear his sister intoning the scale of the raag with its repetition of *sa*, *ga* and *ma*. His mother was chopping spinach, which she now threw into a saucepan and, as the heat reached the wet and finely cut green leaves, a whitish vapour began to rise from them. This reminded Masood of the two slaughtered sheep.

'Ammi jan,' he said, 'I saw two sheep at the butcher's shop today. They had been skinned and the flesh was sending up a misty vapour just like my breath on cold mornings.'

'Oh yes!' his mother said absent-mindedly, as she tried to stoke the fire.

'And I touched the flesh with my finger. It was warm.'

'Oh yes!' she said, moving the saucepan in which she had washed the spinach, before leaving the kitchen.

'And this flesh throbbed at so many spots.'

'Oh yes!' This was Masood's sister who, forgetting her exercise was suddenly attentive. 'How did it throb?'

'Like this . . . like this,' Masood said, snapping his fingers.

'What happened then?'

Masood thought for a moment. 'What then? Nothing, I just told you what I saw at the butcher's shop. I even touched it. It was warm.'

It was warm . . . now come here and do something for me.'

'What?'

'Come with me first.'

'No, first tell me what.'

'Come with me first.'

'No, first tell me.'

‘All right, my back is hurting badly ... I will lie on the bed and you press the sore areas with your feet . . . Aren’t you my darling brother! I swear it really hurts.’ Then she began to pound her back with clenched fists.

‘What is wrong with your back? It is always hurting. And I am the one you always pick on to press it. Why don’t you ask your friends to do that? They are always hanging around here.’

He stood up. ‘All right, I will do it but no more than ten minutes.’

‘Good boy, good boy!’ she said, and put away the exercise book from which she was trying to memorize her musical scales and went into the room where both of them slept.

To get to the room, they had to walk across a small open courtyard. Kalsoom paused there for a moment, stretched herself, looked up at the sky which was overcast and said, ‘Masood, it will definitely rain today.’ But Masood was already in the room, sprawled on his bed.

Kalsoom came in and threw herself on her bed, face down. Masood stood up and looked at the clock which said ten minutes to eleven. ‘At exactly eleven, I will stop,’ he announced.

‘All right, but get on with it. And do it well; otherwise I will pull your ears.’ Resting his hands against the wall along which the bed lay, Masood climbed on Kalsoom’s back and began to work her waist rhythmically with his feet, pressing the flesh in, then relieving the pressure, like construction workers mixing clay with their feet. Kalsoom began to moan softly.

Whenever Masood’s feet happened to fall on Kalsoom’s buttocks, he felt as if he was gently pounding the butchered sheep’s flesh that he had touched that morning. He felt somewhat confused, not quite sure what was passing through his mind.

Once or twice, it seemed to him that Kalsoom’s flesh was throbbing under his feet, just like the sheep’s that morning at the butcher’s shop. Having started half-heartedly, he now was beginning to enjoy what he had earlier seen as a chore. Under his weight, Kalsoom was moaning softly, her oohs and ahs keeping time with the movement of his feet and making him feel good.

The clock said it was past eleven but Masood kept on. After some time, she turned around and lying flat on her back said, ‘Now Masood, nice brother, do the same up front.’

Balancing himself against the wall, he placed his feet on her thighs but, every time he did that, he slipped. She began to giggle, almost making him lose his balance. Resting his hands against the wall once again, he placed his feet on her thighs firmly and began to work his feet, under which he could feel her flesh throbbing. ‘Why do you keep giggling? Lie still,’ he said.

Kalsoom straightened herself and said, ‘I feel funny. You kick in like a savage.’

‘I promise, I will not put my full weight on you this time ... I will be careful so that you don’t feel any discomfort,’ he said.

Once again, balancing himself against the wall with his hands, he placed his feet carefully on Kalsoom’s thighs so that she should only feel half his body weight. He began to press her thighs dexterously as the flesh under his feet rippled from side to side.

Masood thought of the tightrope walker who had once come to perform at his school. He felt like one himself.

It was not the first time he had pressed Kalsoom's legs but never before had he felt this way. His mind kept going back to the butcher's shop with that misty vapour rising from the slaughtered sheep's bare flesh. What if Kalsoom was slaughtered and skinned? Would the same kind of vapour rise from her flesh, he wondered. But he immediately wiped off this thought from his mind just as he wiped off the writing on his slate with a sponge.

'That's enough, that's enough,' Kalsoom said, sounding exhausted.

Masood thought of teasing her a little and, as he stepped down from the bed, he began to tickle her in her armpits, sending her into convulsions. She was so weak with laughter that she did not have the strength to push him away. She tried to kick him once but he was quicker and jumped off. Then he picked up his slippers and ran out of the room.

When he walked into the courtyard, a gentle rain had begun to fall, the raindrops disappearing in the brick floor as soon as they touched it. The clouds had come even lower. Masood's body felt warm and the wind felt good on his cheeks. The raindrops sent a shudder through his body. On the roof of the house across the street, a pair of pigeons sat, their feathers fluffed up. He was sure they were warm like a clay pot that has been on a low fire all night. The chrysanthemums in the courtyard looked clean and washed. A strange drowsiness hung in the air, wrapping him up like a warm woollen shawl.

Masood felt overwrought but he could not understand his thoughts. Whatever it was, it felt nice.

He stood in the rain till his hands went cold. When he pressed them, he saw whitish spots that disappeared just as quickly. He clenched his fists and began to blow on them. He felt warmer though wet. Then he walked into the kitchen. The food was ready and he began to eat. His father returned from the burial. They did not talk. Masood's mother rose and went into her room, followed by her husband. He heard the two of them talking in low voices.

After he had eaten, Masood went to the living room, opened the window and lay down on the carpeted floor. Because of the rain, it had become colder. A wind had also risen. But Masood did not find it unpleasant, though his muscles hurt slightly. Once or twice, he stretched himself and it felt good. It seemed to him that there was some strange presence in his body, but where exactly it was, he couldn't tell. A feeling of restlessness washed over him. His body seemed to be getting longer.

After tossing and turning on the floor for some time, he stood up, went to the kitchen and from there walked into the courtyard. Nobody was around. The rain had stopped. Masood pulled out his hockey stick and ball from where he always kept them and began to play. Once when the ball hit a door with a loud bang, his father screamed, 'Who is that?'

'It is I, Masood.'

'What are you doing?' his father asked.

'Playing.'

‘All right, play,’ then after some time, ‘your mother is pressing my head so don’t make a noise.’

Masood let the ball rest where it was and, hockey stick in hand, walked towards the bedroom. One door was shut while the other was half open. On tiptoe, Masood moved forward and threw the doors ajar. Kalsoom and her friend Bimla screamed, then covered themselves with a quilt. But he had seen what they were doing.

Bimla’s blouse was unbuttoned and Kalsoom was staring at her breasts.

Masood could not quite understand. His brain felt foggy. He returned to the living room and sat down. A surge of power rose in his body, paralysing his ability to think.

He picked up the hockey stick, placed it across his thighs and wondered if it would snap if he were to push it down at both ends with all his strength. He began to do that but could only manage to bend it slightly. He wrestled with it for some time and, finally, in frustration, he chucked it away.

TOBA TEK SINGH

A couple of years after the partition of the country, it occurred to the respective governments of India and Pakistan that inmates of lunatic asylums, like prisoners, should also be exchanged. Muslim lunatics in India should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums should be sent to India.

Whether this was a reasonable or an unreasonable idea is difficult to say. One thing, however, is clear. It took many conferences of important officials from the two sides to come to the decision. Final details, like the date of actual exchange, were carefully worked out. Muslim lunatics whose families were still residing in India were to be left undisturbed, the rest moved to the border for the exchange. The situation in Pakistan was slightly different, since almost the entire population of Hindus and Sikhs had already migrated to India. The question of keeping non-Muslim lunatics in Pakistan did not, therefore, arise.

While it is not known what the reaction in India was, when the news reached the Lahore lunatic asylum, it immediately became the subject of heated discussion. One Muslim lunatic, a regular reader of the fire-eating daily newspaper *Zamindar*, when asked what Pakistan was, replied after deep reflection, ‘The name of a place in India where cut-throat razors are manufactured.’

This profound observation was received with visible satisfaction.

A Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh, ‘Sardarji, why are we being sent to India? We don’t even know the language they speak in that country.’

The man smiled. ‘I know the language of the Hindostonis. These devils always strut about as if they were the lords of the earth.’

One day a Muslim lunatic, while taking his bath, raised the slogan ‘Pakistan Zindabad’ with such enthusiasm that he lost his balance and was later found lying on the floor unconscious.

Not all inmates were mad. Some were perfectly normal, except that they were murderers. To spare them the hangman’s noose, their families had managed to get them

committed after bribing officials down the line. They probably had a vague idea why India was being divided and what Pakistan was, but, as for the present situation, they were equally clueless.

Newspapers were no help either, and the asylum guards were ignorant, if not illiterate. Nor was there anything to be learnt by eavesdropping on their conversations. Some said there was this man by the name Muhammad Ali Jinnah, or the Quaid-e-Azam, who had set up a separate country for Muslims, called Pakistan.

As to where Pakistan was located, the inmates knew nothing. That was why both the mad and the partially mad were unable to decide whether they were now in India or in Pakistan. If they were in India, where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come that until only the other day it was India?

One inmate had got so badly caught up in this India-Pakistan-Pakistan-India rigmarole that one day, while sweeping the floor, he dropped everything, climbed the nearest tree and installed himself on a branch, from which vantage point he spoke for two hours on the delicate problem of India and Pakistan. The guards asked him to get down; instead he went a branch higher, and when threatened with punishment, declared, 'I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree.'

When he was finally persuaded to come down, he began embracing his Sikh and Hindu friends, tears running down his cheeks, fully convinced that they were about to leave him and go to India.

A Muslim radio engineer, who had an M.Sc degree, and never mixed with anyone, given as he was to taking long walks by himself all day, was so affected by the current debate that one day he took off all his clothes, gave the bundle to one of the attendants and ran into the garden stark naked.

A Muslim lunatic from Chaniot, who used to be one of the most devoted workers of the All India Muslim League, and obsessed with bathing himself fifteen or sixteen times a day, had suddenly stopped doing that and announced his name was Muhammad Ali—that he was Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This had led a Sikh inmate to declare himself Master Tara Singh, the leader of the Sikhs. Apprehending serious communal trouble, the authorities declared them dangerous, and shut them up in separate cells.

There was a young Hindu lawyer from Lahore who had gone off his head after an unhappy love affair. When told that Amritsar was to become a part of India, he went into a depression because his beloved lived in Amritsar, something he had not forgotten even in his madness. That day he abused every major and minor Hindu and Muslim leader who had cut India into two, turning his beloved into an Indian and him into a Pakistani.

When news of the exchange reached the asylum, his friends offered him congratulations, because he was now to be sent to India, the country of his beloved. However, he declared that he had no intention of leaving Lahore, because his practice would not flourish in Amritsar.

There were two Anglo-Indian lunatics in the European ward. When told that the British had decided to go home after granting independence to India, they went into a state of deep shock and were seen conferring with each other in whispers the entire afternoon. They were worried about their changed status after independence. Would there

be a European ward or would it be abolished? Would breakfast continue to be served or would they have to subsist on bloody Indian chapatti?

There was another inmate, a Sikh, who had been confined for the last fifteen years. Whenever he spoke, it was the same mysterious gibberish: *'Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the fining the dal of the laltain.'* Guards said he had not slept a wink in fifteen years. Occasionally, he could be observed leaning against a wall, but the rest of the time, he was always to be found standing. Because of this, his legs were permanently swollen, something that did not appear to bother him. Recently, he had started to listen carefully to discussions about the forthcoming exchange of Indian and Pakistani lunatics. When asked his opinion, he observed solemnly, *'Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the Government of Pakistan.'*

Of late, however, the Government of Pakistan had been replaced by the government of Toba Tek Singh, a small town in the Punjab which was his home. He had also begun inquiring where Toba Tek Singh was to go. However, nobody was quite sure whether it was in India or Pakistan.

Those who had tried to solve this mystery had become utterly confused when told that Sialkot, which used to be in India, was now in Pakistan. It was anybody's guess what was going to happen to Lahore, which was currently in Pakistan, but could slide into India any moment. It was also possible that the entire subcontinent of India might become Pakistan. And who could say if both India and Pakistan might not entirely vanish from the map of the world one day?

The old man's hair was almost gone and what little was left had become a part of the beard, giving him a strange, even frightening, appearance. However, he was a harmless fellow and had never been known to get into fights. Older attendants at the asylum said that he was a fairly prosperous landlord from Toba Tek Singh, who had quite suddenly gone mad. His family had brought him in, bound and fettered. That was fifteen years ago.

Once a month, he used to have visitors but, since the start of communal troubles in the Punjab, they had stopped coming. His real name was Bishen Singh, but everybody called him Toba Tek Singh. He lived in a kind of limbo, having no idea what day of the week it was, or month, or how many years had passed since his confinement. However, he had developed a sixth sense about the day of the visit, when he used to bathe himself, soap his body, oil and comb his hair and put on clean clothes. He never said a word during these meetings, except occasional outbursts of, *'Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain.'*

When he was first confined, he had left an infant daughter behind, now a pretty, young girl of fifteen. She would come occasionally, and sit in front of him with tears rolling down her cheeks. In the strange world that he inhabited, hers was just another face.

Since the start of this India-Pakistan caboodle, he had got into the habit of asking fellow inmates where exactly Toba Tek Singh was, without receiving a satisfactory answer, because nobody knew. The visits had also suddenly stopped. He was increasingly restless, but, more than that, curious. The sixth sense, which used to alert him to the day of the visit, had also atrophied.

He missed his family, the gifts they used to bring and the concern with which they used to speak to him. He was sure they would have told him whether Toba Tek Singh

was in India or Pakistan. He also had a feeling that they came from Toba Tek Singh, where he used to have his home.

One of the inmates had declared himself God. Bishen Singh asked him one day if Toba Tek Singh was in India or Pakistan. The man chuckled. 'Neither in India nor in Pakistan, because, so far, we have issued no orders in this respect.'

Bishen Singh begged 'God' to issue the necessary orders so that his problem could be solved, but he was disappointed, as 'God' appeared to be preoccupied with more pressing matters. Finally, he told him angrily, '*Uper the gur gur the annexe the mung the dal of Guruji da Khalsa and Guruji ki fateh . . . jo boley so nihaal sat sri akal.*'

What he wanted to say was, 'You don't answer my prayers because you are a Muslim god. Had you been a Sikh god, you would have been more of a sport.'

A few days before the exchange was to take place, one of Bishen Singh's Muslim friends from Toba Tek Singh came to see him—the first time in fifteen years. Bishen Singh looked at him once and turned away, until a guard said to him, 'This is your old friend Fazal Din. He has come all the way to meet you.'

Bishen Singh looked at Fazal Din and began to mumble something. Fazal Din placed his hand on his friend's shoulder and said, 'I have been meaning to come for some time to bring you news. All your family is well and has gone to India safely. I did what I could to help. Your daughter Roop Kaur...'—he hesitated— 'She is safe too ... in India.'

Bishen Singh kept quiet; Fazal Din continued, 'Your family wanted me to make sure you were well. Soon you will be moving to India. What can I say, except that you should remember me to bhai Balbir Singh, bhai Vadhawa Singh and bhai Amrit Kaur. Tell bhai Balbir Singh that Fazal Din is well by the grace of God. The two brown buffaloes he left behind are well too. Both of them gave birth to calves, but, unfortunately, one of them died after six days. Say I think of them often and to write to me if there is anything I can do.'

Then he added, 'Here, I brought you a nice treat from home.' Bishen Singh took the gift and handed it to one of the guards. 'Where is Toba Tek Singh?' he asked.

'Where? Why, it is where it has always been.' 'In India or in Pakistan?' 'In India ... no, in Pakistan.'

Without saying another word, Bishen Singh walked away, murmuring, '*Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the Pakistan and Hindustan dur fittay moitn.*'

Meanwhile, the exchange arrangements were rapidly being finalized. Lists of lunatics from the two sides had been exchanged between the governments, and the date of transfer fixed.

On a cold winter evening, buses full of Hindu and Sikh lunatics, accompanied by armed police and officials, began moving out of the Lahore asylum towards Wagha, the dividing line between India and Pakistan. Senior officials from the two sides in charge of exchange arrangements met, signed documents and the transfer got under way.

It was quite a job getting the men out of the buses and handing them over to officials. Some just refused to leave. Those who were persuaded to do so began to run pell-mell in every direction. Some were stark naked. All efforts to get them to cover themselves had

failed because they couldn't be kept from tearing off their garments. Some were shouting abuse or singing. Others were weeping bitterly. Many fights broke out.

In short, complete confusion prevailed. Female lunatics were also being exchanged and they were even noisier. It was bitterly cold.

Most of the inmates appeared to be dead set against the entire operation. They simply could not understand why they were being forcibly removed, thrown into buses and driven to this strange place. There were slogans of 'Pakistan Zindabad' and 'Pakistan Murdabad', followed by fights.

When Bishen Singh was brought out and asked to give his name so that it could be recorded in a register, he asked the official behind the desk, 'Where is Toba Tek Singh? In India or Pakistan?'

'Pakistan,' he answered with a vulgar laugh.

Bishen Singh tried to run, but was overpowered by the Pakistani guards who tried to push him across the dividing line towards India. However, he wouldn't move. This is Toba Tek Singh,' he announced. *'Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana mung the dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan.'*

Many efforts were made to explain to him that Toba Tek Singh had already been moved to India, or would be moved immediately, but it had no effect on Bishen Singh. The guards even tried force, but soon gave up.

There he stood in no-man's-land on his swollen legs like a colossus.

Since he was a harmless old man, no further attempt was made to push him into India. He was allowed to stand where he wanted, while the exchange continued. The night wore on.

Just before sunrise, Bishen Singh, the man who had stood on his legs for fifteen years, screamed and as officials from the two sides rushed towards him, he collapsed to the ground.

There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth, which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.

COLDER THAN ICE

As Ishwar Singh entered the room, Kalwant Kaur rose from the bed and locked the door from the inside. It was past midnight. A strange and ominous silence seemed to have descended on the city. Kalwant Kaur returned to the bed, crossed her legs and sat down in the middle. Ishwar Singh stood quietly in a corner, holding his kirpan absent-mindedly. Anxiety and confusion were writ large on his handsome face.

Kalwant Kaur, apparently dissatisfied with her defiant posture, moved to the edge and sat down, swinging her legs suggestively. Ishwar Singh still had not spoken.

Kalwant Kaur was a big woman with generous hips, fleshy thighs and unusually high breasts. Her eyes were sharp and bright and over her upper lip there was faint bluish down. Her chin suggested great strength and resolution.

Ishwar Singh had not moved from his corner. His turban, which he always kept smartly in place, was loose and his hands trembled from time to time. However, from his strapping, manly figure, it was apparent that he had just what it took to be Kalwant Kaur's lover.

More time passed. Kalwant Kaur was getting restive. 'Ishr Sian,' she said in a sharp voice.

Ishwar Singh raised his head, then turned it away, unable to deal with Kalwant Kaur's fiery gaze.

This time she screamed, 'Ishr Sian.' Then she lowered her voice and added, 'Where have you been all this time?'

Ishwar Singh moistened his parched lips and said, 'I don't know.'

Kalwant Kaur lost her temper. 'What sort of a mother-fucking answer is that!'

Ishwar Singh threw his kirpan aside and slumped on the bed. He looked unwell. She stared at him and her anger seemed to have left her. Putting her hand on his forehead, she asked gently, 'Jani, what's wrong?'

'Kalwant.' He turned his gaze from the ceiling and looked at her. There was pain in his voice and it melted all of Kalwant Kaur. She bit her lower lip. 'Yes jani.'

Ishwar Singh took off his turban. He slapped her thigh and said, more to himself than to her, 'I feel strange.'

His long hair came undone and Kalwant Kaur began to run her fingers through it playfully. 'Ishr Sian, where have you been all this time?'

'In the bed of my enemy's mother,' he said jocularly. Then he pulled Kalwant Kaur towards him and began to knead her breasts with both hands. 'I swear by the Guru, there's no other woman like you.'

Flirtatiously, she pushed him aside. 'Swear over my head. Did you go to the city?'

He gathered his hair in a bun and replied, 'No.'

Kalwant Kaur was irritated. 'Yes, you did go to the city and you looted a lot more money and you don't want to tell me about it.' 'May I not be my father's son if I lie to you,' he said.

She was silent for a while, then she exploded, 'Tell me what happened to you the last night you were here. You were lying next to me and you had made me wear all those gold ornaments you had looted from the houses of the Muslims in the city and you were kissing me all over and then, suddenly, God only knows what came over you, you put on your clothes and walked out.'

Ishwar Singh went pale. 'See how your face has fallen,' Kalwant Kaur snapped. 'Ishr Sian,' she said, emphasizing every word, 'you're not the man you were eight days ago. Something has happened.'

Ishwar Singh did not answer, but he was stung. He suddenly took Kalwant Kaur in his arms and began to hug and kiss her ferociously. 'Jani, I'm what I always was. Squeeze me tighter so that the heat in your bones cools off.'

Kalwant Kaur did not resist him, but she kept asking, 'What went wrong that night?'

‘Nothing.’

‘Why don’t you tell me?’

‘There’s nothing to tell.’

‘Ishr Sian, may you cremate my body with your own hands if you lie to me!’

Ishwar Singh did not reply. He dug his lips into hers. His moustache tickled her nostrils and she sneezed. They burst out laughing.

Ishwar Singh began to take off his clothes, ogling Kalwant Kaur lasciviously. ‘It’s time for a game of cards.’

Beads of perspiration appeared over her upper lip. She rolled her eyes coquettishly and said, ‘Get lost.’

Ishwar Singh pinched her lip and she leapt aside. ‘Ishr Sian, don’t do that. It hurts.’

Ishwar Singh began to suck her lower lip and Kalwant Kaur melted. He took off the rest of his clothes. Time for a round of trumps,’ he said.

Kalwant Kaur’s upper lip began to quiver. He peeled her shirt off, as if he was skinning a banana. He fondled her naked body and pinched her arm. ‘Kalwant, I swear by the Guru, you’re not a woman, you’re a delicacy,’ he said between kisses.

Kalwant Kaur examined the skin he had pinched. It was red. ‘Ishr Sian, you’re a brute.’

Ishwar Singh smiled through his thick moustache. ‘Then let there be a lot of brutality tonight.’ And he began to prove what he had said.

He bit her lower lip, nibbled at her earlobes, kneaded her breasts, slapped her glowing hip resoundingly and planted big, wet kisses on her cheeks.

Kalwant Kaur began to boil with passion like a kettle on high fire.

But there was something wrong.

Ishwar Singh, despite his vigorous efforts at foreplay, could not feel the fire which leads to the final and inevitable act of love. Like a wrestler who is being had the better of, he employed every trick he knew to ignite the fire in his loins, but it eluded him. He felt cold.

Kalwant Kaur was now like an overtuned instrument. ‘Ishr Sian,’ she whispered languidly, ‘you have shuffled me enough; it is time to produce your trump.’

Ishwar Singh felt as if the entire deck of cards had slipped from his hands on to the floor.

He laid himself against her, breathing irregularly. Drops of cold perspiration appeared on his brow. Kalwant Kaur made frantic efforts to arouse him, but in the end she gave up.

In a fury, she sprang out of bed and covered herself with a sheet. ‘Ishr Sian, tell me the name of the bitch you have been with who has squeezed you dry.’

Ishwar Singh just lay there panting.

‘Who was that bitch?’ she screamed.

‘No one, Kalwant, no one,’ he replied in a barely audible voice.

Kalwant Kaur placed her hands on her hips. 'Ishr Sian, I'm going to get to the bottom of this. Swear to me on the Guru's sacred name, is there a woman?'

She did not let him speak. 'Before you swear by the Guru, don't forget who I am. I am Sardar Nihal Singh's daughter. I will cut you to pieces. Is there a woman in this?'

He nodded his head in assent, his pain obvious from his face.

Like a wild and demented creature, Kalwant Kaur picked up Ishwar Singh's kirpan, unsheathed it and plunged it in his neck. Blood spluttered out of the deep gash like water out of a fountain. Then she began to pull at his hair and scratch his face, cursing her unknown rival as she continued tearing at him.

'Let go, Kalwant, let go now,' Ishwar Singh begged.

She paused. His beard and chest were drenched in blood. 'You acted impetuously,' he said, 'but what you did I deserved.'

Tell me the name of that woman of yours,' she screamed.

A thin line of blood ran into his mouth. He shivered as he felt its taste.

'Kalwant, with this kirpan I have killed six men . . . with this kirpan with which you. . '

'Who was the bitch, I ask you?' she repeated.

Ishwar Singh's dimming eyes sparked into momentary life. 'Don't call her a bitch,' he implored.

'Who was she?' she screamed.

Ishwar Singh's voice was failing. 'Ill tell you.' He ran his hand over his throat, then looked at it, smiling wanly. 'What a mother-fucking creature man is!'

'Ishr Sian, answer my question,' Kalwant Kaur said.

He began to speak, very slowly, his face coated with cold sweat.

'Kalwant, jani, you can have no idea what happened to me. When they began to loot Muslim shops and houses in the city, I joined one of the gangs. All the cash and ornaments that fell to my share, I brought back to you. There was only one thing I hid from you.'

He began to groan. His pain was becoming unbearable, but she was unconcerned. 'Go on,' she said in a merciless voice.

'There was this house I broke into ... there were seven people in there, six of them men whom I killed with my kirpan one by one . . . and there was one girl... she was so beautiful... I didn't kill her ... I took her away.'

She sat on the edge of the bed, listening to him.

'Kalwant jani, I can't even begin to describe to you how beautiful she was... I could have slashed her throat but I didn't... I said to myself... Ishr Sian, you gorge yourself on Kalwant Kaur every day . . . how about a mouthful of this luscious fruit!

'I thought she had gone into a faint, so I carried her over my shoulder all the way to the canal which runs outside the city . . . then I laid her down on the grass, behind some bushes and ... first I thought I would shuffle her a bit... but then I decided to trump her right away . . .'

‘What happened?’ she asked.

‘I threw the trump . . . but, but. . .’

His voice sank.

Kalwant Kaur shook him violently. ‘What happened?’

Ishwar Singh opened his eyes. ‘She was dead ... I had carried a dead body ... a heap of cold flesh . . . jani, give me your hand.’

Kalwant Kaur placed her hand on his. It was colder than ice.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Beginning with isolated incidents of stabbing, it had now developed into full-scale communal violence, with no holds barred. Even home-made bombs were being used.

The general view in Amritsar was that the riots could not last long. They were seen as no more than a manifestation of temporarily inflamed political passions which were bound to cool down before long. After all, these were not the first communal riots the city had known. There had been so many of them in the past. They never lasted long. The pattern was familiar. Two weeks or so of unrest and then business as usual. On the basis of experience, therefore, the people were quite justified in believing that the current troubles would also run their course in a few days. But this did not happen. They not only continued, but grew in intensity.

Muslims living in Hindu localities began to leave for safer places, and Hindus in Muslim majority areas followed suit. However, everyone saw these adjustments as strictly temporary. The atmosphere would soon be clear of this communal madness, they told themselves.

Retired judge Mian Abdul Hai was absolutely confident that things would return to normal soon, which was why he wasn’t worried. He had two children, a boy of eleven and a girl of seventeen. In addition, there was an old servant who was now pushing seventy. It was a small family. When the troubles started, Mian sahib, being an extra cautious man, had stocked up on food .. . just in case. So on one count, at least, there were no worries.

His daughter, Sughra, was less sure of things. They lived in a three-storey house with a view of almost the entire city. Sughra could not help noticing that, whenever she went on the roof, there were fires raging everywhere. In the beginning, she could hear fire engines rushing past, their bells ringing, but this had now stopped. There were too many fires in too many places, nights had become particularly frightening. The sky was always lit by conflagrations like giants spitting out flames. Then there were the slogans which rent the air with terrifying frequency— ‘Allaho Akbar’, ‘Har Har Mahadev’.

Sughra never expressed her fears to her father, because he had declared confidently that there was no cause for anxiety. Everything was going to be fine. Since he was generally always right, she had initially felt reassured.

However, when the power and water supplies were suddenly cut off, she expressed her unease to her father and suggested apologetically that, for a few days at least, they should

move to Sharifpura, a Muslim locality, where many of the old residents had already moved to. Mian sahib was adamant. 'You're imagining things. Everything is going to be normal very soon.'

He was wrong. Things went from bad to worse. Before long there was not a single Muslim family to be found in Mian Abdul Hai's locality. Then one day Mian sahib suffered a stroke and was laid up. His son, Basharat, who used to spend most of his time playing self-devised games, now stayed glued to his father's bed.

All the shops in the area had been permanently boarded up. Dr Ghulam Hussain's dispensary had been shut for weeks and Sughra had noticed from the rooftop one day that the adjoining clinic of Dr Goranditta Mal was also closed. Mian sahib's condition was getting worse day by day. Sughra was almost at her wits' end. One day she took Basharat aside and said to him, 'You've got to do something. I know it's not safe to go out, but we must get some help. Our father is very ill.'

The boy went, but came back almost immediately. His face was pale with fear. He had seen a blood-drenched body lying in the street and a group of wild-looking men looting shops. Sughra took the terrified boy in her arms and said a silent prayer, thanking God for his safe return. However, she could not bear her father's suffering. His left side was now completely lifeless. His speech had been impaired and he mostly communicated through gestures, all designed to reassure Sughra that soon all would be well.

It was the month of Ramadan and only two days to Id. Mian sahib was quite confident that the troubles would be over by then. He was again wrong. A canopy of smoke hung over the city, with fires burning everywhere. At night the silence was shattered by deafening explosions. Sughra and Basharat hadn't slept for days.

Sughra in any case couldn't because of her father's deteriorating condition. Helplessly, she would look at him, then at her young, frightened brother and the seventy-year-old servant Akbar, who was useless for all practical purposes. He mostly kept to his bed, coughing and fighting for breath. One day Sughra told him angrily, 'What good are you? Do you realize how ill Mian sahib is? Perhaps you are too lazy to want to help, pretending that you are suffering from acute asthma. There was a time when servants used to sacrifice their lives for their masters.'

Sughra felt very bad afterwards. She had been unnecessarily harsh on the old man. In the evening, when she took his food to him in his small room, he was not there. Basharat looked for him all over the house, but he was nowhere to be found. The front door was unlatched. He was gone, perhaps to get some help for Mian sahib. Sughra prayed for his return, but two days passed and he hadn't come back.

It was evening and the festival of Id was now only a day away. She remembered the excitement which used to grip the family on this occasion. She remembered standing on the rooftop, peering into the sky, looking for the Id moon and praying for the clouds to clear. But how different everything was today. The sky was covered in smoke and on distant roofs one could see people looking upwards. Were they trying to catch sight of the new moon or were they watching the fires, she wondered.

She looked up and saw the thin sliver of the moon peeping through a small patch in the sky. She raised her hands in prayer, begging God to make her father well. Basharat, however, was upset that there would be no Id this year.

The night hadn't yet fallen. Sughra had moved her father's bed out of the room on to the veranda. She was sprinkling water on the floor to make it cool. Mian sahib was lying there quietly, looking with vacant eyes at the sky where she had seen the moon. Sughra came and sat next to him. He motioned her to get closer. Then he raised his right arm slowly and put it on her head. Tears began to run from Sughra's eyes. Even Mian sahib looked moved. Then with great difficulty he said to her, 'God is merciful. All will be well.'

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Sughra's heart began to beat violently. She looked at Basharat, whose face had turned white like a sheet of paper. There was another knock. Mian sahib gestured to Sughra to answer it. It must be old Akbar who had come back, she thought. She said to Basharat, 'Answer the door. I'm sure it's Akbar.' Her father shook his head, as if to signal disagreement.

'Then who can it be?' Sughra asked him.

Mian Abdul Hai tried to speak, but before he could do so Basharat *came* running in. He was breathless. Taking Sughra aside, he whispered, 'It's a Sikh.'

Sughra screamed, 'A Sikh! What does he want?'

'He wants me to open the door.'

Sughra took Basharat in her arms and went and sat on her father's bed, looking at him desolately.

On Mian Abdul Hai's thin, lifeless lips, a faint smile appeared. 'Go and open the door. It is Gurmukh Singh.'

'No, it's someone else,' Basharat said.

Mian sahib turned to Sughra. 'Open the door. It's him.'

Sughra rose. She knew Gurmukh Singh. Her father had once done him a favour. He had been involved in a false legal suit and Mian sahib had acquitted him. That was a long time ago, but every year, on the occasion of Id, he would come all the way from his village with a bag of *sewwaiyaan*. Mian sahib had told him several times, 'Sardar sahib, you really are too kind. You shouldn't inconvenience yourself every year.' But Gurmukh Singh would always reply, 'Mian sahib, God has given you everything. This is only a small gift which I bring every year in humble acknowledgement of the kindness you did me once. Even a hundred generations of mine would not be able to repay your favour. May God keep you happy.'

Sughra was reassured. Why hadn't she thought of it in the first place? But why had Basharat said it was someone else? After all, he knew Gurmukh Singh's face from his annual visit.

Sughra went to the front door. There was another knock. Her heart missed a beat. 'Who is it?' she asked in a faint voice.

Basharat whispered to her to look through a small hole in the door.

It wasn't Gurmukh Singh, who was a very old man. This was a young fellow. He knocked again. He was holding a bag in his hand of the same kind Gurmukh Singh used to bring.

'Who are you?' she asked, a little more confident now.

‘I am Sardar Gurmukh Singh’s son Santokh.’

Sughra’s fear had suddenly gone. ‘What brings you here today?’ she asked politely.

‘Where is Judge sahib?’ he asked.

‘He **is** not well,’ Sughra answered.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ Santokh Singh said. Then he shifted his bag from one hand to the other. ‘Here is some sewwaiyaan.’ Then after a pause, ‘Sardarji is dead.’

‘Dead!’

‘Yes, a month ago, but one of the last things he said to me was, “For the last ten years, on the occasion of Id, I have always taken my small gift to Judge sahib. After I am gone, it will become your duty.” I gave him my word that I would not fail him. I am here today to honour the promise made to my father on his deathbed.’

Sughra was so moved that tears came to her eyes. She opened the door a little. The young man pushed the bag towards her. ‘May God rest his soul,¹ she said.

‘Is Judge sahib not well?’ he asked.

‘No.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘He had a stroke.’

‘Had my father been alive, it would have grieved him deeply. He never forgot Judge sahib’s kindness until his last breath. He used to say, “He is not a man, but a god.” May God keep him under his care. Please convey my respects to him.’

He left before Sughra could make up her mind whether or not to ask him to get a doctor.

As Santokh Singh turned the corner, four men, their faces covered with their turbans, moved towards him. Two of them held burning oil torches; the others carried cans of kerosene oil and explosives. One of them asked Santokh, ‘Sardarji, have you completed your assignment?’

The young man nodded.

‘Should we then proceed with ours?’ he asked.

‘If you like,’ he replied and walked away.

End